

READING, PRAYING, LIVING
POPE FRANCIS'S *LAUDATO SÌ*

Reading, Praying, Living Pope Francis's *Laudato Si*

A Faith Formation Guide

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Contents

Introduction 7

Seeing

1 What Is Happening to Our Common Home 17

2 The Gospel of Creation 26

Judging

3 The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis 39

4 Integral Ecology 49

Acting

5 Lines of Approach and Action 59

6 Ecological Education and Spirituality 70

Notes 83

For Further Reading 85

Introduction

A papal encyclical—or “circular letter”—is rarely greeted with international attention. An encyclical is the most authoritative teaching document a pope can release. Yet popes issue *many* of them. Saint John Paul II wrote fourteen. Pope Leo XIII (r. 1878–1903) wrote over eighty, including letters on the rosary and on how to teach philosophy in Catholic schools. Needless to say, these did not make global headlines!

But Pope Leo wrote an encyclical in 1891 called *Rerum Novarum*, “on the new things,” and this did capture attention. It spoke out on the pressing social issues of the day: the relationship between workers and big industry and the battle between a ruthless capitalism and a rising socialism. Taking neither side, Leo criticized the excesses of both socialists and capitalists in light of Catholic teaching and natural wisdom. He established principles for both workers and owners, aiming to animate their relationship with the virtues of justice and charity. *Rerum Novarum* is now seen as the beginning of a special line of “social encyclicals,” the church’s official response to pressing social crises of the day.

These particular encyclicals receive more attention because they address the wider world. Francis begins *Laudato Si* with the customary references to earlier encyclicals, starting with St. John XXIII’s *Pacem in Terris*, which was a call for peace as the world was on the verge of nuclear self-destruction in the early

Major Papal Social Encyclicals

Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (On Capital and Labor, 1891)

Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* (On Reconstruction of the Social Order, 1931)

John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* (On Christianity and Social Progress, 1961)

John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (On Establishing Universal Peace, 1963)

Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples, 1967)

John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work, 1981)

John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (For the Twentieth Anniversary of *Populorum Progressio*, 1987)

John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (On the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, 1991)

Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (On Integral Human Development, 2009)

1960s. Francis is signaling how very urgent the environmental crisis is. But *Laudato Si* was highly anticipated for two other reasons.

It is the first encyclical primarily devoted to the issue of the environment—while the topic was addressed in past encyclicals and papal writings, this was the first time the church would lay out the whole picture. Francis begins by noting how Popes Paul VI, St. John Paul II, and Benedict XVI have all spoken with urgency about the environmental crisis, as has the most prominent leader of the Eastern Orthodox Church, Patriarch Bartholomew, whom Francis also cites (4–9). Indeed, Benedict XVI was called “the Green Pope” for his attention to this topic and his actions making the Vatican the first carbon-neutral country in the world. But Francis’s letter would be the first to go in depth to explain the church’s commitment to Catholics and to all people of goodwill.

It was also the first social encyclical from this “rock star” Pope Francis, whose outspoken teachings and powerful actions on the topics of social justice and the poor have captured the world’s attention since his election in 2013. Francis has highlighted the need for the church to pay more attention to its teachings about social solidarity—these teachings were clearly stated by previous popes, but did not get the attention they really deserved. Francis is assuring that they are front and center. And even his choice of papal name indicated he was going to challenge people on the environment: St. Francis of Assisi’s unique perspective led him to a radical simplicity of life and a recognition of even the smallest creatures as brothers and sisters (11)—a real challenge to the dream life of accumulation pictured in our advertising!

Because there was so much anticipation (and even a leak a few days before the official release), readers have probably heard something about the encyclical. That’s good, but readers should also be cautious: it’s a long document that says a lot of things. There is no “executive summary.” And Francis has a writing style that is more akin to a storyteller stringing together insights and ideas than a professor with a tight textbook presentation.

The Pope’s Major Points

In paragraph 16, Francis writes he will return again and again to the following themes: “the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, the conviction that everything in the world is connected, the critique of new paradigms and forms of power derived from technology, the call to seek other ways of understanding the economy and progress, the value proper to each creature, the human meaning of ecology, the need for forthright and honest debate, the serious responsibility of international and local policy, the throwaway culture and the proposal of a new lifestyle.”

This is part of his point: the church's teaching is not just information, a list of bullet points, or a party platform. It is a *spirituality* and a *way of life*. The pope's title, *Laudato Si*, means "Praise Be," the beginning of St. Francis's hymn praising God for all creatures. And so an actual encounter with the text should not just be about understanding the information and the ideas. It should also be about spiritual development and ethical action. It should change us inside and outside. We not only need to read it; we need to pray it and live it.

That's what this reading guide is designed to do. First and foremost, it's a guide through a lengthy text, pointing out key highlights. Imagine you are in a totally new city, and you have five days. Probably you are not simply going to walk the streets and hope you bump into interesting things (although you could!). You'll look for some way to see important things. "Important" doesn't necessarily mean only the big landmarks. When I visit a city, I often look for "off the beaten path" treasures that may not be the biggest highlights, but are really worth the time. I'll do that with Francis's text, too. But in addition to a reading guide, I include directions for prayer and questions for living. These can be done in a group, or on your own, and they are meant to help you connect spiritual texts and daily choices to the social teaching that Francis offers.

As I mentioned, there's no way to capture the deep wisdom of this encyclical in just a few bullet points. But there are certain key themes, central insights, that Francis circles around repeatedly in the text. As you read, it is important to keep these insights in mind, because they can help orient you in the midst of a lot of details!

1. "*Everything is connected to everything else.*" This phrase occurs frequently through the entire encyclical. It is a central message of contemporary environmentalism: the study of ecosystems shows that one change often creates many other,

unexpected changes. But more important, for Francis, it is the key to the spiritual life. The spiritual life should not just be a little compartment of life. It should not separate itself off from the world. He once criticized “sacristy Christians”—this is not because the pope is against prayer or liturgy! Rather, he is against sealing liturgy and prayer off from real life, from the world, and from the creation itself. For Francis, “everything is connected” not only connects spirituality and daily life, God and creation. It also means “*everyone* is connected.” The human family is one, and it has a common home. But do we actually see these connections? Do we live them out? Francis is connecting the dots. Think about this idea of making connections as you move through the text.

2. *The environmental crisis is fundamentally a spiritual crisis.* Just a few days following the release of *Laudato Si*, Cardinal Peter Turkson, one of the pope’s most important advisors on this document, spoke to the environmental crisis in his address to the United Nations: “the single biggest challenge is not scientific or even technological, but rather within our minds and hearts.”¹ This should not be misunderstood; obviously, environmental problems are real material problems. They are about physics and chemistry and biology, about political relationships and laws. The pope devotes chapter 1 to the scientific background and chapter 5 to the importance of international and local policies. But the word “fundamentally” means that the *root* of the crisis lies in our relationship with God. Environmental problems are like the proverbial “canary in a coal mine”—the death of the canary tells us something is deeply wrong. Francis says in the opening paragraphs that “the violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms

of sickness” in so many environmental systems (2). Pay special attention to how the pope is always connecting environmental problems back to spiritual problems.

3. *Technical solutions aren't enough; we need new and different lifestyles.* Sometimes if something is dirty, we just need to get the right tools to clean it up. It can sound like this is what the environment needs, too: just a little cleaning up. But if it's a spiritual crisis, then it is manifest in our lifestyle, which the pope calls a “throwaway” culture that creates both environmental and human “waste.” The fact is that we have most of the technology needed to make life sustainable for everyone on the planet. But that can't be the life that many in the United States take for granted. With less than 5 percent of the world's population, the United States consumes around 25 percent of its resources, and US consumers rank last in a National Geographic Society index of sustainable behavior in developed countries.² The resource usage of the average American is two to three times greater than comparable use in other developed nations like Germany, Britain, and Japan. Good technology is important, but it can't support our current lifestyle. This theme in the encyclical forces us to look at the man (or woman) in the mirror. The pope is blunt in making this connection—but he is also joyful about it. He consistently points out all the ways in which a different lifestyle, one that is simple and less wasteful, would ultimately be spiritually enriching and in better relationship with others. We can do that if we recognize that we need to make that change.
4. *We need to love the earth as a sister or as we do our own homes.* In the very first paragraphs of *Laudato Si*, Francis uses the images of “common home” and “sister Earth.” These images of a home and family we love and for whom we take

responsibility should shape our view of the planet. Just as we don't see our homes or our siblings as raw material for our own disposal, we shouldn't see the planet as nothing more than raw material, either! Instead, all things are part of God's wondrous creation, and have a value in themselves. Francis says, "Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise" (13). The greatest living American environmental writer, Wendell Berry, says "it all turns on affection." Affection is something that turns our heart toward the other as having value and worth. Francis makes precisely this point, too. He compares St. Francis's attitude to all creatures with what happens when we fall in love with someone, and notes that he saw all creatures "united to him by bonds of affection" (11). Without this deep affection, we will approach the world as sinful "masters" and "consumers" who are "unable to set limits on their immediate needs."

As we approach the encyclical, we might also pray for the grace of humility. A genuine humility always reflects Christ; Francis has been a prime example of it. When discussing social issues in our society, things can quickly become destructive. Egos appear. Disagreements are taken personally. We are unable to hear criticisms of "our side." Many people who find this kind of argument unattractive simply withdraw. This is certainly no recipe for being faithful Christians together. It's important for Americans to recognize that the pope is not a Democrat or a Republican. He's not writing for one side or the other. He also recognizes the only way we will make progress on environmental issues is if people actually talk and work together. This is not just Christian; it's practical. Humility makes it possible for us to speak our differences, listen, and perhaps grow toward one another. Let us listen to God, to the pope, to one another, and to the world.

Let us pray about it—*really* pray—and not just react. And then let's act together so that God's will might be done on earth, and not just in heaven.

SEEING

In chapters 1 and 2, we take the first step with the pope: we *see* what is going on around us. I remember a popular pro-environment song in the 1980s entitled “Look Out Any Window” (go ahead and Google it!), which chronicled the harms we were doing to the earth and urged people to pay attention. As a teenager, that song struck me. In chapter 1 the pope outlines what is going on around us. But it’s not as simple as looking out a window. If it was, we’d probably do something about it. The problem is a bit more complicated, and we need to see it more clearly. But we also need to see it with eyes of faith, and so in chapter 2 the pope adjusts our lenses by looking at key Christian beliefs that shape how we view nature and our place in it.

1 What Is Happening to Our Common Home

The blind man replied to him, "Master, I want to see."

—Mark 10:51

Be a pedestrian along a busy road. Or do one of those “adopt-a-highway” clean-ups. You’ll be appalled by all the trash. Once for Earth Day, I participated in a tree planting along a stream off a busy four-lane state highway. Even that far off the road, we found the endless fast-food containers, beverage bottles, cigarette packets, grocery bags, and other “disposables” that people just tossed. What were they thinking? That the trash would just “disappear”?

I’m assuming that most people reading this book don’t litter like this! Yet, when Pope Francis says that we are turning the planet into “an immense pile of filth” (21), I can’t help but think of those roadsides. What we don’t always understand is this: we are *all* throwing out waste by the side of the road, pretending it has just gone away. We’ve created a throwaway culture—and we keep speeding along in this lifestyle at 50 mph, which is a big part of the reason we don’t see it. We also don’t see it because it’s happening gradually, like the clutter that just seems to accumulate in our houses. And we don’t see it because we’re not always knowledgeable about how “everything is connected” in the natural world.

Let's take a different example, but one that is in some ways like roadside trash: the plight of the bees. Have you heard? Several years ago, beekeepers worldwide discovered large numbers of their hives just dying. In many areas, over half of all hives had collapsed. The cause was so mysterious that the phenomenon was named "colony collapse disorder"—as in, "we know something is really wrong, but we don't quite know what."

While you might not want bees on your back porch, bees are really important for the world. For example, they pollinate about a third of the fruits and nuts we consume in the United States. Beekeepers who harvest honey year-round also truck their hives off to the west coast every year and set the bees loose in apple orchards and almond plantations—so that all these plants can actually produce their fruit. Doing this by hand would be virtually impossible. "Everything is connected"—even if you don't eat honey, you probably rely on bees most days.

Why the collapse? Well, no one knows for sure, but the culprit many suspect is a class of chemicals called neonicotinoids. These new pesticides do not kill the bees outright, but weaken their resistance to disease and disorient their homing mechanisms. Previously restricted, many of these chemicals were allowed starting in the late 1990s, and their use has increased. Some European countries have banned their use, but debates over a ban continue in the United States.

No one *intends* the death of the bees, and it's important to understand that there is not just one cause. Just like some forms of human illness, there are multiple factors that converge. Some hives were invaded by parasites that the bees failed to resist, but the question of why the bees are not able to fight off the parasites needs answering. There is considerable evidence that the (new) waste from the use of pesticides is endangering the system. Of course, the good news is that professional beekeepers have found a solution: just create more bees to replace the dead ones.¹ But we

may still be troubled by this industrial approach to the problem, and many other environmental issues cannot be solved by a “just make more” mentality. Natural systems are very complicated, and *the wastes from one process often affect others in ways we don't always see*. For example, did you know . . .

. . . that the Chesapeake Bay and the Mississippi Delta are full of dead zones because of fertilizer pollution from lawns and farms hundreds of miles away?

. . . that the fish from “pristine” northern lakes are filled with poisonous mercury because of coal burning?

. . . that we are living through an era called “the sixth great extinction,” because species are disappearing at a rate 100 to 1000 times higher than natural?²

. . . that the chickens who laid the eggs in your fridge were probably debeaked, because without that their lives are so confined and awful that they would have pecked each other to death?

. . . that as much as 40 percent of the food America produces (with the help of so much fertilizer and pesticides) is never eaten and just goes to waste?

. . . that old televisions and computers end up in massive waste dumps outside third-world cities, where children pick through the toxic waste to recover small amounts of metals for recycling?

In all of these cases, notice that you probably don't *intend* the awful effects of the waste. But they are there, nonetheless.

In this chapter, Pope Francis tries to help us see what is happening overall to the natural world. Studies have shown that *scientific literacy* is one of the most important motivators for

environmental action. You don't have to be a scientist; you just have to have some sense of the connections. The pope is not a scientist (although he did have some training as a chemist in his early years), but in assembling the encyclical, much care was taken by the papal team, assisted by the Political Academy of Sciences, to be careful, critical, and clear on this presentation of how the natural world works—and is breaking down.

When reading this section, especially if you are new to these issues, it's helpful to divide the material into two sections. The beginning and end of the chapter (17–22, 43–59) find the pope sounding like a raging biblical prophet: he's sending the message that the situation is serious and we can't avoid it. He calls it "unprecedented," and warns of the spread of technology "linked to business interests" which "is supposed to solve a problem, but only creates others" (20). In particular, the pope notes how conversations lack "a clear awareness of the problems which especially affect the excluded" because people live "far removed from the poor" and so cannot hear "both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (49). He also criticizes political leaders: it is "remarkable how weak international political responses have been," limited to "superficial rhetoric, sporadic acts of philanthropy, and perfunctory expressions of concern" (54). Then he criticizes ordinary citizens in rich countries: "many people will deny doing anything wrong because distractions constantly dull our consciousness of just how limited and finite our world really is" (56). Notice how the pope connects the dots: the environmental crisis and our lack of response is due to a whole range of problems, from abandonment of the poor to the pervasive power of money to simple distractedness because of technological overload. But in all this, the pope's bottom line is: we need to wake up! He criticizes those who say "things do not look that serious," saying that such "evasiveness" is how "human beings contrive to feed their self-destructive vices: trying not to see them, trying

not to acknowledge them, delaying the important decisions and pretending that nothing will happen” (59).

Sobering. But also potentially overwhelming. When faced with these sizeable interconnected problems, we may retreat in despair. But the pope insists on hope: “For all our limitations, gestures of generosity, solidarity and care cannot but well up within us, since we were made for love” (58). We can change.

One way to get a handle on the crisis is to ask where the central problems lie. This is the middle part of the chapter (23–42), where Francis highlights *three particular crises*: climate change, water, and biodiversity. These are the core of the problem, he says, and if we can better see how these work, we can better understand how our lives need to change.

The pope starts with the problem of climate change (global warming), which “represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day” (25). While nonhuman factors may be involved, the pope says that the enormous increase in the human burning of fossil fuels, human-caused deforestation, and agricultural expansions contribute decisively to the “greenhouse effect.” The increase of carbon and other heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere throws off the “breathing cycle” of the planet, which maintains its temperature and climate patterns. What will happen is difficult to predict, except that (a) it is likely to be very disruptive, and (b) these disruptions will most affect the poorest people and countries, who lack the resources to adjust. The pope importantly points out that the atmosphere is a “common good,” and so international cooperation is absolutely necessary to deal with this problem.

Climate change is sometimes controversial. Some of the confusion rests on our tendency to want to see problems as simply black-and-white—either fossil fuels are polluting, or they are not. But the problem with the atmosphere is a different kind of problem: we are not introducing something toxic, but rather overloading a natural cycle that maintains many systems on

the planet, like temperature, sea level, glacier melt, and weather tracks. The problem is not like a disease outbreak; it's more like the health problems that come with obesity or high blood pressure. Slowly but surely, excessive pressure is put on the whole system, until things start breaking down.

And we need to be clear: the laws of physics and chemistry cannot be changed. Francis is fond of saying: "God always forgives, men and women sometimes forgive, but nature never forgives."³ An example vividly illustrates Francis's point: estimates suggest that there is an overall limit to the amount of carbon humans can put into the atmosphere without large changes in temperature. Over the course of the last two centuries, we've already gone over halfway, and we are currently on a pace to max out the limit within fifty years.⁴

The second problem the pope highlights is water. Like the atmosphere, water is essential for life. But in some places, the well is simply running dry. The most dire consequences might not come for a "few decades," but let's remember that a few decades is not very long at all. In the summer of 2015, we have heard many news stories about the chronic drought gripping the American West, especially California, where tens of millions of people live in a desert and where we grow a great deal of our food (also in a desert!). A similar tale is happening in Chile, another place where conditions are ideal for growing lots of rich crops—except for the minimal rainfall. Water problems are increased by climate change, which means less snowfall in mountains and the receding of glaciers, the seasonal melting of which provided the water. The deficit is made up by pumping up underground water, but these aquifers too are running out. Without water, the land dies, and the people cannot be sustained. Even current water crises demonstrate Francis's point that "we all know that it is not possible to sustain the present level of consumption in developed countries and wealthier sectors of society" (27).

Finally, the third problem discussed is the loss of biodiversity. This is less well-known, not so much the subject of news stories. But scientists have long warned that, due to the large-scale destruction of ecosystems, especially in remote areas like the rain forests of South America and Indonesia, we are witnessing the unprecedented extinction of many species. The pope puts this in theological perspective: “Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God . . . nor convey their message to us” (33). Species require habitats, and if we destroy that habitat, we will extinguish the species. Nature preserves are important for this reason, but they are not really enough, given the scale of destruction. Worse, all this destruction happens for “quick and easy profit”—to make cheap, throwaway furniture or grow a few seasons of crops on marginal soil.

If climate change is a problem of a *cycle running too fast*, and water is a matter of *running out*, biodiversity is more like humans *running over* other creatures. These extinctions are the roadkill of the “rapidification” of our society and economy (18). Francis calls us to recognize the intrinsic value of nature for its own sake. We look at “unused” natural land, and we think it is “useless” unless we make it into something we can sell.

Running too fast, running out, and running over. In all three of these cases, the pope is keen to accentuate his message about waste, as well as the “human waste” when we neglect the special plight of the poor, which is sometimes “brought up as an afterthought” and “in a tangential way” (49). Not only have the poor *not* been the major consumers of the planet, but they also face bigger difficulties in adapting to changes. Poor regions and nations cannot compensate for failing water supplies by luxuries like bottled water, nor can “impoverished coastal populations” afford to move away or construct defenses. Francis is especially frustrated that people “blame population growth instead of extreme and selective consumerism” for our environmental problems (50).

This is wrong. The primary problem is not the births of the poor, but the lifestyles of the rich. He states a message he will repeat throughout the encyclical: “a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach” (49). He means that genuine care for the environment will always be connected to the problems in society that create and sustain poverty.

In this first chapter, the pope has only skimmed the surface of the environmental excesses we face, and we have only skimmed the surface of his text! But hopefully he has communicated enough to help us see that we all need to be paying more attention to our relationship with the Earth. We’ve all heard about “going green,” but the pope wants those in

The primary problem is not the births of the poor, but the lifestyles of the rich.

wealthier countries especially to step it up. It’s serious. This is the only “common home” we all have, and we need “to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it” (19).

Questions for Life

1. What is your personal reaction to the crises Pope Francis describes? Is it urgency? Despair? Frustration? Talk about these reactions with others. It is important to acknowledge our initial responses. What do you think Pope Francis would say if he were to respond to what you are feeling?
2. What do you know about your own “carbon footprint,” the sources of water in your life and the plants and animals that are (or were) native to your place? Who can take out their phone and check these out? It is great to start where you are, beginning to understand the nature of your own place and what distortions impact it.

3. What can you do each day to remind yourself of Pope Francis's call to feel this suffering and be encouraged to do something about it? Daily practices, however small, are a place where we begin to notice more and more connections and see more and more creative ways forward.

For Prayer

When Jesus tells the disciples to find food for the crowds, they scoff at him (John 6:1-15). It is a deserted place, and they do not have enough food. But a young boy comes forward to give five loaves and two fish, even though the disciples say: "What good are these for so many?" Through Jesus's blessing, the young boy's offering is multiplied to feed the crowd and do the impossible. Meditate on what it must have been like for the boy to offer his food, even though he knew it wasn't enough. Ask God for the grace to multiply the loaves and fishes you bring to seemingly impossible problems.